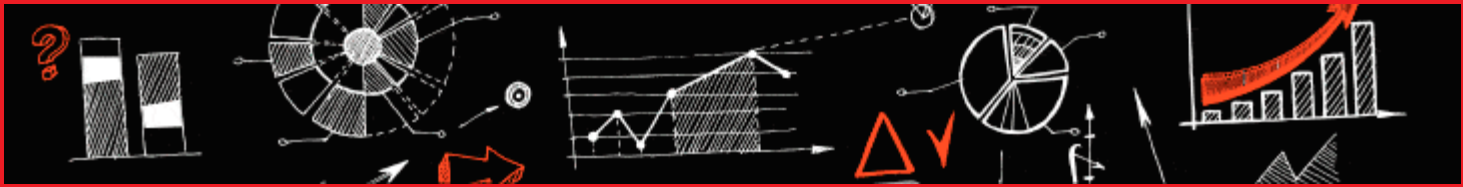


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Tuscan adventure

Anne Cooke

Wednesday, December 30, 2015

WHEN YOU SAIL on a ship like the 208-passenger Star Breeze, a vessel nimble enough to squeeze up almost any tiny cove or narrow gorge, it's a good idea to bone up on the ports-of-call in advance.



Researching local history always adds zing to a day spent in an unfamiliar destination. If nothing else, you'll have time to decide which shore excursions promise to be that one and only magical mystery tour.

And so it was last spring, as we sailed down Italy's west coast on the Star Breeze, one of Windstar Cruises' three newly acquired and refitted all-suite yachts, a move that Windstar CEO Hans Birkholz describes as the company's "first venture into ships without sails."

After a busy first day in Monaco and a glittering sendoff at the Monte Carlo Casino, we - my husband, Steve, and I - sailed on to Portofino, the oft-photographed celebrity hideaway.

Going ashore for a wake-up coffee, we set out to explore Portofino's steep streets, poking through cheese shops, bakeries, art galleries and souvenir stands. At noon we climbed the ridge behind the village for lunch at the Hotel Spendido, an annual contender for the world's best hotel award.

Later that evening, as I studied the

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ship's next-day port-of-call, the town of Portoferraio, I realized we were headed for the island of Elba, best known as one of European history's most infamous prison sites.

Why Elba? Elba is the island where Napoleon, self-proclaimed emperor of France in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was exiled. If Elba's a barren, storm-tossed rock like Alcatraz (as I'd always imaged it was), I'm not wasting my day going ashore.

But the next morning, as we sailed closer, a gentle hill appeared on the horizon with an ancient tower and walled harbor along the shore.

Red-tiled mansions lined the water's edge where private yachts and fishing boats rode at anchor. Miniature cottages climbed the hill, half hidden among groves of trees. Elba wasn't a prison at all.

And the shore excursions I'd expected to blow off? Two choices offered rich dividends. The first, a visit to Napoleon's in-town quarters, the gardens, a museum and his country residence, would cure my ignorance. Napoleon, in fact, didn't live on Elba very long, escaping within the year. But the second excursion, a circle-island tour, offered a chance to see the real Elba, geography, topography, warts and all.

Piling into the bus we were off, following a winding two-lane road across the island, heading for La Chiusa vineyards and a wine tasting served with fresh bread, local olive oil, cheese and fruit. Hillsides planted in pines and olive trees gave way to pastures, milk cows and vegetable gardens; seaside rental cottages perched above sand and pebble beaches.

The tour ended with an hour in another tiny seaside town, Porto Azzurro nearby, leaving enough time to stretch our legs on narrow cobblestone streets, shop for souvenirs and to sit in the sun with a glass of wine.

Sitting on the piazza, watching the slow pace of life, the residents shopping, tourists carrying backpacks and fishermen tying their boats to the dock was so pleasant I wondered why Napoleon wasn't tempted to stay.

But the day on Elba was a testimonial to Windstar's conviction that small ships and offbeat destinations are the answer to the growing demand for more innovative and authentic cruises.

On the Star Breeze, luxury set the pace. But it was the ship's size that felt so manageable. It took me just an hour to explore from top to bottom, learning my way around every space from the decks and the dining room to the lounges, library and the gym.

With fewer than 200 passengers on this cruise, meeting people and learning names was easy. The crew members, too, made a point of remembering not just our names but our preferences.

But it was a couple of sad-tears days for the Seabourn Cruise Line fans on board, passengers who'd sailed on the ship before Seabourn sold it to Windstar.

"We've celebrated some very special birthdays and anniversaries on this ship," said Sarah Miller. "It's been a tradition since 1994. It meant a lot to us. And now, just like that, everything's changed."

When Windstar announced the Star Breeze's new itineraries, Miller decided to take her chances. By our last night on board, she'd had a change of heart.

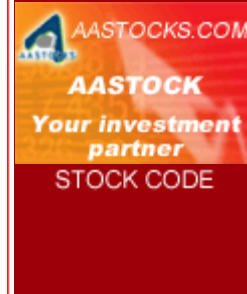
"I guess the ship needed a face lift," she reported. "The new color schemes work and the upholstery is elegant but unobtrusive. I can't get used to the new name or why they call it a yacht. But it's the same ship, same polished brass and teak decks."

But as Birkholz explained, the "yacht" classification is part of a shift toward more narrowly focused cruise experiences.

Expedition ships offer demanding or even strenuous shore tours and single-themed trips: polar bears and Arctic ice; the Amazon jungles, coral reef health.

The 2,000- to 4,000-passenger giants sell onboard vacation fun as low as US\$100 (HK\$780) per head a day, with poolside parties, theater shows and casinos.

And in the yacht category, the Star Breeze adds a new dimension to the Windstar fleet, offering experiences in offbeat places, with all the creature comforts anyone could want. "So far, it's a winning combination," said Miller as we disembarked.



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